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ABSTRACT

All of the television camera shots in the three Ford/Carter presidential debates were studied according to type, frequency, and duration to determine whether the images presented by the camera could have influenced the audience's perception of the candidates. According to the debate rules, each candidate was allowed three minutes to answer a question and two minutes for follow up on an opponent's question; an overall evaluation revealed that Ford was asked 13 follow up questions, while Carter was asked 10, and that Ford spoke on camera eight and a half minutes longer than Carter. This time discrepancy was explained by the different rates of speaking of the men. The camera shots for each candidate were analyzed as follows: the most obvious single shot was the talking head/shoulders image with little variation between men; in reaction shots, Carter projected a positive image while Ford projected a negative one; in shots where one man answered while the audience observed the other, Carter was shown reacting to Ford more frequently; and in camera shots where neither man was talking, there was no advantage given to either candidate. The camera shots for all three debates were judged as fair to both candidates, whether by accident or design. (Data tables are appended.) (MAI)

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# ACCIDENT AND DESIGN: IMPLICATIONS OF TECHNICAL AND FUNCTIONAL FACTORS OF NETWORK TELEVISION COVERAGE OF THE FORD/CARTER PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

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ACCIDENT AND DESIGN: IMPLICATIONS OF TECHNICAL AND FUNCTIONAL FACTORS OF NETWORK TELEVISION COVERAGE OF THE FORD/CARTER PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

Like the Nixon/Kennedy presidential debates of 1960, the Ford/Carter debates of 1976 prompted communication scholars to analyze the event from a variety of perspectives. If you were one of the estimated one hundred million people who watched the Ford/Carter debates, you may remember the following introductions by Walter Cronkite, the CBS anchorman, and Edwin Newman, the ABC reporter who moderated the first debate:

> Good evening. Tonight's historic event was organized by the League of Women Voters. The candidates will be questioned by a panel of three reporters chosen by the League after consultation with the candidates. Other ground rules tonight prohibit the television networks from showing the reactions of the invited audience in the theater and limit coverage to pool cameras. The event is about to begin.
>
> Good evening. I'm Edwin Newman, moderator of this first debate of the 1976 campaign between Gerald R. Ford of Michigan, Republican candidate for President, and Jimmy Carter of Georgia, Democratic candidate for President.
> . . . . . .
> Tonight's debate focuses on domestic issues and economic policy. . . . Under the agreed rules the first question will go to Governor Carter. That was decided by the toss of a coin. He will have up to three minutes to answer. One follow-up question will be permitted with up to two minutes to reply. President Ford will then have two minutes to respond. The next question will go to President Ford with the same arrangements and questions will continue to be alternated between the candidates. Each man will make a three-minute statement at the end, Governor Carter to go first. President Ford and Governor Carter do not have any notes or prepared remarks with them this evening.

Thus, from the very first introductions of the presidential debates, there was an obvious evidence of rules. In fact, the preparation for the debates by the League of Women Voters focused on such things

as the number of debates, the location of each, the timing, the selection of panelists/moderators, the procedural rules of the debate itself, the coverage by the television networks, and a host of other considerations. Although there was clearly much planning, the real test was the actual televised product--what was made available to the television audience. One feature of the televised product has been ignored; the various implications of the camera shots. Therefore, we are specifically concerned with the type, frequency, and duration of camera shots used during the three Ford/Carter debates.[1]

Our basic assumption throughout this paper is that the different camera shots presented different resulting images of the candidates which could have affected the audiences' perception of the candidates. For example, we were interested in seeking answers to such questions as: What were the most characteristic types of camera shots in the Ford/Carter debates? Which camera shots were the most frequent? Which candidate was "on camera" for the greatest amount of time? What variance of camera shots occurred for each candidate for each of the three debates? What was the frequency and duration of specific camera shots, e.g., reaction shots? And, throughout all of these questions, we wondered how the camera shots compared for each candidate for each of the three debates and in what ways the camera shots varied?

Of course, some of the camera shots we were interested in were not comparable within a single debate, but rather, comparable only within the context of all three debates combined. For example, when a camera shot included both candidates at the same time or when the

the camera shots did not involve either candidate (e.g., when the focus was on an individual panelist, the moderator, or the full panel of questioners) comparisons could only be made across the three separate debates.

Procedure The senior author previously worked on a study of candidate image by focusing on nonverbal features of the Ford/Carter debates.[2] A direct-feed video-tape of the three Ford/Carter debates was made with a calibrated timing device super-imposed on the bottom of the screen for this earlier paper; these same tapes served the present study. Thus, as each camera shot was presented, an accurate record was made of the type, frequency, and duration.

Findings and Discussion According to the debate rules established by the League, each candidate was allowed three minutes to answer each question, two minutes to answer any follow-up question, and his opponent was allowed two minutes to respond. So, one of the first questions we asked was: Which candidate took advantage of these time periods to maximize his on-camera speaking times? And, which candidate was asked the most follow-up questions by the panelists? Table 1 provides comparative data for on-camera speaking times and also provides data for the number of follow-up questions posed to each

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TABLE 1 about here

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candidate. In Debate I both Ford and Carter were asked five follow-up questions; in Debate II Ford was asked four and Carter three; and in Debate III Ford was aked four and Carter two. Thus, across all three debates, Ford received thirteen follow-up questions to Carter's ten.

Since the debate rules allowed the panelists to ask follow-up questions when they desired, the number of such follow-up questions was "accidental" (i.e., not predetermined). We can only speculate as to the reason for the variance. Perhaps the difference in the number of follow-up questions suggests that Ford's answers were not sufficiently clear, thus prompting the panelists to ask follow-up questions. This certainly was the case in Debate II when Ford stated that "there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe." Max Frankel of the New York Times probably felt compelled to seek clarification in a follow-up question. Of course, the panelists also could have requested follow-up questions merely for the sake of their own ego or to increase their exposure on national television.

The question of the maximum use of the available time per the candidates is answered by Table 2. We find that Ford used more

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TABLE 2 about here

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of his allotted time in each of the three debates. Across all three debates, Ford actually was speaking on-camera for 505 seconds (or about 8½ minutes) longer than Carter. Again, we speculate on the reasons for this difference. Carter spoke between 22% to 27% faster than Ford. Carter averaged 164-176 words per minute to Ford's more deliberate 128-133 words per minute. Thus, because of Carter's faster speaking rate, he was able to use 12% more words in 11% less time than Ford.[3] In addition, the accidental audio break during the end of Debate I caused an interruption of Carter's answer; he was cut off in mid-sentence and when the audio was restored, he made only a brief comment. And, Carter surprised many during Debate III when he was asked if he

had a response (two minutes were available to him) concerning Ford's answer to a question dealing with his involvement in Watergate. Carter simply replied, "I don't have any response." In retrospect, this was perhaps wise strategy for Carter. It seemed to suggest that Ford's answer was so obviously weak that it was unnecessary to even comment further.

The most obvious feature of the camera shots was when each of the candidates was answering questions or providing responses. The dominant camera shot was the familiar talking head/shoulders image, not unlike watching one of the commentators on the network evening news. For variation, the directors sometimes zoomed out from the candidate so that one could see the head/shoulders/hands. And, there was some instances in Debates II and III where the director zoomed out even further so that the television image provided the audience was that of sitting on the very front row looking over the backs of the panelists. However, as Table 3 clearly indicates, there was little variation and the dominant one was probably as it should have been; the head/shoulders shot of the individual candidate talking. It is

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TABLE 3 about here

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clear from Table 3 that there was great consistency in the camera shots of the individual candidates while answering questions or providing responses. For example, across all three debates, the head/shoulders camera shot for Ford totaled 89 minutes compared to 88 minutes for Carter; the head/shoulders/hands camera shot for Ford was 14 minutes to Carter's 12 minutes; and the head/shoulders/hands (from behind the

panelists' back) totaled 1 minute for Ford to ½ minute for Carter. There was greater variance in Debates II and III in terms of the types of camera shots for individual candidates while talking. We speculate that this probably is a function of the various directors since each of the debates was the responsibility of a different major network (ABC, CBS, NBC). But clearly, as indicated in Table 3, the ABC director omitted the zoom out shots of the individual candidates entirely. The literature on nonverbal research clearly demonstrates the importance of facial expression. Basically, nonverbal communication can act to repeat, contradict, substitute, complement, accent, and regulate the verbal component of messages.[4] And, since the facial expression is the most important of the nonverbal cues, the tighter head/shoulders camera shots would seem to be advantageous to the candidate, but the one minute difference across all three debates is not significant.

Perhaps one of the most interesting "accidental" functions of the various camera shots used in the debates involved candidate reaction shots. Almost all of the debate commentaries and criticisms focused at one time or another on candidate image. We suspect that much of this imagery is based on the single candidate reaction shots, i.e., those instances in which one candidate was answering a question or presenting a response and then the camera switched to the opposing candidate to project his nonverbal reaction. Table 4 provides comparable data on single candidate reaction shots. It should be remembered

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TABLE 4 about here

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that the receiver's perception and interpretation of nonverbal cues takes place very rapidly. Thus, even though it might appear that the frequency and duration of the reaction shots summarized in Table 4 are too limited to take on much importance, we take the opposite view; we feel that the reaction shots comprise perhaps the most memorable projected imagery of the candidates. In Debate I, Carter had 4 reaction shots to Ford's 2 and in Debate III, Carter had 4 reaction shots to Ford's 1. Only in Debate II did Ford have more reaction shots than Carter; Ford had 16 and Carter had 14. A review of the video-tapes convinces us that in general the reaction shots of Carter projected a positive image while the reaction shots of Ford projected a negative image. In terms of duration, when the reaction shots are summed for each candidate across all three debates, Ford had 19 total reaction shots for a total of 1 minute, 33 seconds and Carter had 22 total reaction shots for a total of 2 minutes, 11 seconds. Again, we emphasize that the 38 seconds difference may seem insignificant, but nonverbal cues are perceived very rapidly. We also realize that another point of view can be taken here. That view is that even when one considers that nonverbal cues are indeed transmitted rapidly, the variance in both frequency and duration is so small that we should compliment the directors for their fairness. Frankly, we do not know whether the similarity of the frequency and duration of the reaction shots are due to accident or design, but we acknowledge that both are much closer and more similar than we expected or remembered. And, the fact that we "remembered" greater differences suggests that our earlier expressed view, i.e., that those 38 seconds of difference are significant, has some merit.

There was another type of reaction shot used in the debates. This one involved a wide shot which included both candidates at the same time. Thus, while one candidate was answering or responding, the audience could see the reaction of the opposing candidate. Table 5 indicates that Ford received 22 of these "dual" reaction

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TABLE 5 about here

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shots for a total of 3 minutes and 14 seconds and that Carter received 27 such reaction shots for a total of 5 minutes and 25 seconds. Thus, there was a difference of 2 minutes and 11 seconds which presented Carter reacting to Ford more frequently and for a greater duration of time than Ford reacting to Carter. If we are correct in assigning positive values to reaction shots, then Carter was definitely favored here.

There was another camera shot that included both candidates at the same time. However, these shots were taken when the candidates were not talking. These shots served primarily to provide the audience with the context of the physical surroundings and typically took place at the beginning of each of the debates and at the end of each of the debates. In addition, during the long audio breakdown of the first debate, the director selected this camera shot so that the audience could watch both candidates simultaneously. Table 6 provides the data

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TABLE 6 about here

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for these camera shots. Even though the figures are inflated due to the accidental audio breakdown of Debate I, it is interesting to note

that the "zoom out" shots (first, from behind the panelists' backs and second, from behind the audience's back) were completely omitted in Debate I and were used sparingly in Debates II and III. Since both candidates were shown simultaneously in these camera shots, there is no comparable data and, no advantage to either candidate.

There were, of course, camera shots of the full panel, single panelists, and of the moderator. Table 7 reflects the frequencies

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TABLE 7 about here

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and the durations of these camera shots.

Finally, there was one particularly unusual camera shot used; it occurred only in Debates II and III. Table 8 reflects the data

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TABLE 8 about here

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for a camera shot from behind the candidate's back, a sort of view or perspective as it looked to the candidates. Carter received 3 such camera shots in Debate II and Ford received 2 such camera shots in Debate III.

Conclusions We believe that camera shots as used in the 1976 Ford/Carter debate deserve researcher's attention. Overall, we think that by accident or design, the directors of the three networks which were involved and the careful planning by the League of Women Voters should be commended for general fairness in terms of camera shots for both candidates. There are a number of implications of camera shots

as used in presidential debates for the future. Careful planning would prevent the use of camera shots giving any one candidate the advantage over the other candidate. We believe that the information in this paper can serve to point out potential dangers. As an example, we point to the differences in reaction shots in the Ford/Carter debates. In our opinion, Carter received some slight advantage since he received more frequent and longer reaction shots than did Ford. One way to completely eliminate any possible advantage would be to use the wide angle camera shot that includes both candidates simultaneously througout the entire debate sequence. However, this cure is probably worse than the illness since such a consistent camera shot would be very dull. And, one of the most consistent criticisms was that the debates were too dull. To add consistent camera shots would, in our opinion, add to the dullness and probably induce a heart attack in Marshall McLuhan.

We do believe that communication scholars should take a serious look at technical features of such important televised events as the presidential debates. We hope this paper will stimulate some to consider the technical features of camera shots more seriously.[5]

TABLE 1

COMPARISONS OF ON-CAMERA SPEAKING FREQUENCY AND TIMES

| | DEBATE I | | | DEBATE II | | | DEBATE III | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | freq. | aver. | total time | freq. | aver. | total time | freq. | aver. | total time |
| C answer | 6 | (2.50) | 896 (14.97) | 7 | (2.33) | 979 (16.32) | 7 | (2.22) | 924 (15.40) |
| C follow-up | 5 | (1.49) | 448 ( 7.47) | 3 | ( .92) | 166 ( 2.77) | 2 | ( .70) | 86 ( 1.43) |
| F response | 6 | (1.94) | 698 (11.63) | 7 | (2.21) | 930 (15.50) | 7 | (2.03) | 853 (14.22) |
| F answer | 6 | (2.30) | 827 (13.78) | 7 | (2.24) | 941 (15.68) | 7 | (2.19) | 918 (15.30) |
| F follow-up | 5 | (1.40) | 420 ( 7.00) | 4 | (1.19) | 286 ( 4.77) | 4 | (1.25) | 299 ( 4.98) |
| C response | 6 | (1.80) | 646 (10.77) | 7 | (1.80) | 757 (12.62) | 7 | (1.78) | 746 (12.43) |
| C summary | 1 | (3.07) | 184 ( 3.07) | 1 | (3.25) | 195 ( 3.25) | 1 | (3.80) | 228 ( 3.80) |
| F summary | 1 | (4.32) | 259 ( 4.32) | 1 | (1.23) | 74 ( 1.23) | 1 | (4.28) | 257 ( 4.28) |

numbers in parentheses equal time expressed in minutes

TABLE 2

SUMMARY OF ON-CAMERA SPEAKING TIME PER DEBATE

| | DEBATE I | DEBATE II | DEBATE III |
|---|---|---|---|
| Carter | 2176 (36.27) | 2097 (34.95) | 1984 (33.07) |
| Ford | 2204 (36.73) | 2231 (37.18) | 2327 (38.78) |

numbers in parentheses equal time expressed in minutes

TABLE 3

SINGLE CANDIDATE SHOTS - WHILE TALKING

| Camera Shot | | F-I | C-I | F-II | C-II | F-III | C-III | Combined I, II, III Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| head/shoulders | Frequency | 33 | 33 | 46 | 44 | 31 | 24 | 211 |
| | Tot. Duration | 2095 | 2080 | 1790 | 1720 | 1476 | 1330 | 10491 |
| | Aver. Duration | 63 | 63 | 38 | 39 | 47 | 55 | 50 |
| head/shoulders hands | Frequency | 0 | 0 | 4 | 7 | 12 | 10 | 33 |
| | Tot. Duration | 0 | 0 | 196 | 287 | 640 | 451 | 1574 |
| | Aver. Duration | 0 | 0 | 49 | 41 | 53 | 45 | 48 |
| head shoulders hands (from behind panelist back) | Frequency | 0 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 9 |
| | Tot. Duration | 0 | 0 | 51 | 15 | 13 | 14 | 93 |
| | Aver. Duration | 0 | 0 | 13 | 5 | 13 | 14 | 10 |

duration sums are expressed in seconds

TABLE 4

SINGLE REACTION CAMERA SHOTS

| | F-I | C-I | F-II | C-II | F-III | C-III | Totals I,II,III |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frequency | 2 | 4 | 16 | 14 | 1 | 4 | 41 |
| Total Duration | 9 | 27 | 77 | 68 | 7 | 36 | 224 |
| Average Duration | 5 | 7 | 5 | 5 | 7 | 9 | 5 |

duration sums are expressed in seconds

TABLE 5

DUAL REACTION CAMERA SHOTS

| | F-I | C-I | F-II | C-II | F-III | C-III | Totals I,II,III |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frequency | 0 | 0 | 16 | 14 | 6 | 13 | 49 |
| Total Duration | 0 | 0 | 105 | 103 | 89 | 222 | 519 |
| Average Duration | 0 | 0 | 7 | 7 | 15 | 17 | 11 |

duration sums are expressed in seconds

TABLE 6

DUAL CANDIDATE CAMERA SHOTS - NOT TALKING

| Camera Shot | | Debate I | Debate II | Debate III | Totals I,II,III |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| dual shot of both candidates head/shoulders hands | Frequency | 22 | 3 | 7 | 32 |
| | Total Duration | 275 | 14 | 115 | 404 |
| | Average Duration | 12 | 5 | 16 | 13 |
| dual shot of both candidates from behind panelists' back | Frequency | 0 | 8 | 3 | 11 |
| | Total Duration | 0 | 107 | 36 | 143 |
| | Average Duration | 0 | 13 | 12 | 13 |
| dual shot of both candidates from behind panelists' and audiences' back | Frequency | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| | Total Duration | 0 | 21 | 16 | 37 |
| | Average Duration | 0 | 11 | 16 | 12 |

duration sums are expressed in seconds

TABLE 7

FULL PANEL, INDIVIDUAL PANELISTS, AND MODERATOR CAMERA SHOTS

| | | D-1 | D-II | D-III | Combined D-I,D-II,D-II Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| full | Freq. | 2 | 13 | 5 | 20 |
| panel | Tot. Duration | 16 | 46 | 40 | 102 |
| | Aver. Duration | 8 | 5 | 8 | 5 |
| single | Freq. | 27 | 25 | 24 | 76 |
| panel | Tot. Duration | 607 | 430 | 632 | 1669 |
| | Aver. Duration | 22 | 17 | 26 | 22 |
| moderator | Freq. | 8 | 6 | 8 | 22 |
| | Tot. Duration | 186 | 129 | 104 | 419 |
| | Aver. Duration | 23 | 22 | 13 | 19 |

duration sums are expressed in seconds

TABLE 8

UNUSUAL CAMERA SHOTS

| | | F-I | C-I | F-II | C-II | F-III | C-III | Combined I, II,II Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| single | Freq. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 5 |
| candidate | Tot. Duration | 0 | 0 | 0 | 39 | 13 | 0 | 52 |
| shot from behind back | Aver. Duration | 0 | 0 | 0 | 13 | 7 | 0 | 10 |

duration sums are expressed in seconds

NOTES

[1]The various camera shots included (1) head/shoulders, (2) head/shoulders/hands, (3) dual candidate shots while not talking, (4) single candidate reaction shots, (5) dual candidate reaction shots, (6) dual shot of both candidates head/shoulders/hands, (7) dual shot of both candidates head/shoulders/hands/from behind panelists' back, (8) dual shot of both candidates head/shoulders/hands/from behind audience's back, (9) head/shoulders/hands of single candidate from behind panelist's back, (10) single candidate shot from behind the candidate's back (i.e., over the candidate's shoulder), (11) full panel, (12) single panelist, and (13) moderator.

[2]See Gerald M. Goldhaber, Jerry K. Frye, D. Thomas Porter, and Michael P. Yates, "The Image of the Candidates: A Communication Analysis of the Ford/Carter Debates I, II, and III," Resources in Education (November, 1977).

[3]See Goldhaber, Frye, Porter, and Yates, p. 4.

[4]See Mark L. Knapp, Nonverbal Communication in Human Interation (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1972), pp. 9-12.

[5]Some scholars have looked at camera shots seriously and we acknowledge some of them here. See, for example, Robert Williams, "On the Value of Varying Television Shots," Journal of Broadcasting, IX, (Winter, 1965), pp. 33-43; Robert Schlater, "Effect of Irrelevant Visual Cues on Recall of Televised Messages," Journal of Broadcasting, XIV (Winter, 1969), pp. 63-70.